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THE OLYMPIAN RELIGION.

I.—ITS SOURCES AND AUTHORSHIP.

BY THE RIGHT HONORABLE WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE.

BY THE Olympian religion I mean the religion of the Achæans, or Greeks of the Troic period, as it has been portrayed in the “*Iliad*” and the “*Odyssey*.”

There are also partial indications in the Poems of circumjacent worships. These, so far as they have been observed, have been sometimes strangely mistaken for proofs of a dual authorship. They are, in truth, sketches of systems prevailing beyond Achæian limits, interesting in themselves, and important from the light which they cast upon the Olympian scheme properly so called. These exotic religions, of Troas, of the further East, and of the South, will require in their own place such notices as the text will warrant.

And the Olympian religion will also have to be examined on its practical and ethical side.

It follows, from the nature of the case, that I have not to begin with a discussion of what is known as the Homeric question, but simply to pass it by. We have now and here to deal with the whole of the religious presentations in the Poems simply as a collection of facts. They may embrace a mixture of fable and of truth, which we cannot always disentangle from one another ; but both the fable and the truth are facts for the present purpose. They were human concepts ; and every human concept is a fact at least of the conceiving mind. But they were also, as cannot be doubted, based upon what the Poet saw and learned of the human society or societies around him ; and, as descriptions of prevalent usage or ideas, they are facts of human life, belief, and experience.

It would be unpardonable to present my inferences from the

Homeric text as being facts like those of the text itself ; and in placing them before the reader it will be my duty, to the utmost of my ability, to keep the two visibly distinct. The utmost limit of my hope is that they may be found to be, in the main, probable inferences from the language of the text. At least, they are conceived and offered with the intention of conforming in every case to the spirit of my original. It may be right to add that, when I began the serious study of Homer, some forty years ago, I began it without theory or prepossession of any kind, and that my endeavor has been to let his text lead me by the hand. I do not, however, deny that prepossession, even when not entertained at the outset, may be acquired during the earlier, and may thus give a bias to the later, stages of a pursuit. If I have not throughout been able to tread the beaten path, it is because I think, and shall give reasons for thinking, that some of those who have preceded me have not always set out from the proper point or points of departure.

A treatment of the subject, thus composed of facts and of deductions from facts, is widely different from the method which has been sometimes adopted by recent writers. That method is to lay down some theory, which they have been led by considerations extraneous to Homer to adopt, as to the origin of religion, and then to read the Homeric facts, and construe them, in the light of that theory. I speak here of general theories, to which the text is made to bend ; for without doubt every inference may be called a theory on the point to which it belongs. I speak, therefore, of wide and sweeping theories. For instance, it is taught by some that all Aryan religions are founded upon nature-worship, and that Homer describes an Aryan religion ; consequently his deities all represent natural objects, and his text is to be construed accordingly. I contend, on the contrary, that he is to be construed by the laws of grammar and history, and, next to these, by himself carefully compared with himself.

In another vital point I differ from the method which has been almost invariably adopted in writing on what is termed the classical mythology. I claim to separate not only the Greek from the Italian *stoff*, or material, but also to separate that material which belongs to the classical and properly historical period from that which is Homeric ; and which may be called prehistoric, because it is anterior to chronology and continuous record.

I take the entire evidence of Homer, and claim that he be heard alone ; that he be allowed to tell his own tale, without being *in limine* contradicted, hustled, and shouldered out by other witnesses, who have another tale to tell. Their tale is Greek, but is not Achaian ; it is not his tale, because it proceeds from different times and men, and witnesses to altered, multiplied, and comparatively confused traditions.

No ingenuity can weld into a whole the Greek religion of the classical period. But I hope it will not for a moment be supposed that, when I ask for a severance of the Homeric from the non-Homeric material, I intend to disparage the mass of information which is to be gathered from Greek literature generally respecting the religion of that race. It may happen, nay, may often happen, that writers more recent than Homer may present to us traditions more ancient. For example, it seems plain, even from Homeric evidence, that Hesiod deals much more largely in pre-Hellenic material than Homer himself, and that, moreover, with every presumption of fidelity, and without any suspicion of having tampered with his materials for a purpose. This remark has its application to the later Greek authors when they have been in contact with channels of popularly transmitted belief.

It is matter of regret to me to appear as in some sort the censor of any writers whose method I seek to amend, but whose superiority to myself I readily admit: this is, in truth, the only regret I have had to feel in connection with a peculiar, delightful, and profoundly important subject. Those, let me add, from whom I may seem to differ, are well able to defend themselves, should they think that defence is required. They have also, I think, at present the advantage of being the majority.

Until the present century had counted several decades of years, the poems of Homer were loved and studied among us as magnificent romances with more or less of foundation in the world of fact. Distinguished scholars, like Cyril Jackson, the Dean of Christ Church, offered to his memory a worship alike steady and fervent. Still, the historical ingredient in these immortal works was afloat upon the great sea of prehistoric antiquity, like the island of Delos in the well-known legend, unmoored, and unrelated to any authentic records of the past. They had, indeed, been made the object of the fiercest disintegrating attacks ; and it is, perhaps, to these attacks that we are in great part indebted for

that serious scrutiny of the text, upon the comparative method, which has been a characteristic of the more recent Homeric study. This examination opened to the recent inquirer fields of knowledge altogether new. As anatomy discloses to us, under the smooth unbroken texture of the human skin, a system of bones and sinews, of ducts and nerves, so under the surface of the Poems there has lain all along, and there is now perceivable, the entire framework of contemporary human life. The several ethnical factors of the newly-compounded Achaian nation became in some degree distinguishable one from another; and with these distinctions there rose into view those differences of religious belief and worship which severalty of race and local origin implied. I admit that I have here to make an assumption, which must for the present be an assumption only. It is that the Achaian or Greek nation was a composite nation.

In the next place, it has also become clear that the celestial or preternatural portion of the great human dramas represented in the poems was not merely secondary or ornamental, but was, like the terrestrial portion, especially in the "*Iliad*," a work of consummate art, and a vehicle of rich and varied traditions, opening to us the religious beliefs and influences known at a very early date to a particular aggregation of men, which a long experience subsequently proved to be in natural gifts the most richly endowed of all known races. At the same time, so far as chronology is concerned, I apprehend that all research, based upon the text, has tended rather to lengthen than to shorten the interval supposed to lie between the date of the Poems and the classical period of Greece.

While a way was thus opened by which to penetrate further and further into the mine of the Poems of Homer by the light which they themselves afforded, new and powerful sources of information were most opportunely opened from without. The generous and life-long enthusiasm of Dr. Schliemann, now unhappily deceased, led him to undertake excavations which have contributed, in a certain manner and measure, to support the historical character of the "*Iliad*," and to establish a connection between prehistoric Greece and the Egypt of the monuments. Of direct and sweeping results in relation to religion we can hardly speak in connection with this generous toil; but the general effect has been, in whatever degree, to

accredit the Poems, and to favor the presumption of their high antiquity.

Much larger, in relation to the present subject, has been the knowledge derived from those researches in Egypt and in Assyria which, during the second and following quarters of the century, have carried light into wide regions previously most obscure, and have established as history much that was theretofore speculation. These systems of knowledge have required, and have justly obtained, the scientific names of Egyptology and Assyriology. Both of them, but the second in particular, have shed an altogether novel and unexpected light upon the Poems of Homer, especially as regards the subject of religion. They establish the eastern and southern derivation of a number of the elements which go to make up the Homeric system, and in so doing they may, perhaps, be found to supply in some degree a link between the Poems and the historical books of the Old Testament.

We seem, then, to have before us the outline at least of copious materials for a distinct and separate work on the religion of the Homeric Poems. And it is high time, as I contend, to recognize that we possess, in these Poems, a large treasure of knowledge, archæological in the widest sense, as a record of the ideas and beliefs, as well as the acts and characters, of the earliest fathers of the Greek nation. I believe it to be a record fuller and more instinct with life than any other equally ancient record that has been handed down to us ; attested from within by its own self-consistency, and now, after running the gantlet of so many ages, further attested from without by the results of Egyptian and of Assyrian or Babylonian discovery.

There are other and very special reasons for an endeavor to extricate the subject of Homeric religion from the confusing associations by which it has so long been fettered and deformed, and to secure for it its due place in the history of human thought as well as of human life.

What I claim for Homer is not supremacy or infallibility as a guide in our inquiries respecting Hellenic religion. Any such claim is to be repudiated, were it only because it is impossible to say, as we view the field before us, at what point in the general tissue of the Poems the work of literary manipulation ends, and the practical and historical record begins. Even in the Christian churches, resting, as they do, upon a strong dogmatic and his-

toric basis, there is a wide space between the restricted theory of their necessary books, or documents, and the living and working system of their official teachers and disciples. Much more must we guard against precipitate assumption when we have to deal with the effort of a poet to present a systematic religion without the guidance of commanding authority, and in the face of the problems offered by national conditions as yet unadjusted. Yet, after every deduction, there is much to affirm. We have before us a witness independent, solitary, and of unsurpassed creative and constructive powers. In the wide range of his Poems, he speaks to us with a self-consistency not less remarkable than his consummate art. What he has to say, he only has to say. From the depths of a prehistoric period, and across the sea of centuries that separate him from classical Greece, he conveys to us utterances with which there is really nothing to compare. The Hymns called Homeric are evidently the product of a civilization different from his, seated in the Asiatic Greece, and built up after the Dorian conquest. Still less of his spirit, if more of his facts, can be found in the "Theogony" of Hesiod, which conflicts with Homer on a number of vital points, and which almost bears to the Poems of Homer the relation borne by an almanac to a history.

My claim for Homer is that he is worth hearing for himself, and on his own ground, apart from the jangle of discordant voices. No one, early or late, except himself, has exhibited to us the early Achaian religion with comprehensiveness and elaboration. Nowhere else are its features so pronounced that their essential character is legible beyond mistake. All this is on the surface of the case. But we are also invited to mine below the surface, and to see whether, when we have classified his deities according to their ethnical relations, we may not find ourselves introduced to the actual process by which Achaian religion became what it was, and which gives to us an analysis of the nation, as well as of its thearchy, and assigns to each of its main ingredients its proper place and work in the formation of the compound. I seek, then, to extricate Homer and his testimony from the chaotic mass accumulated by so many countries and ages, and to see what lessons he may have to teach us. Not that he will teach us everything. But he will teach us something : whereas the method not uncommonly

pursued seems to be a contrivance for destroying all hope of access to the religion of Greece in its embryonic and most plastic stages.

No great difficulty will perhaps be found in admitting that the testimony of Homer should be received as separate from and superior to that of the classical literature, with reference to the religion of Greece, on account of the wide and silent tract of time by which it precedes that literature. But still we may be asked to give some reasons why we are to demand a similar severance and precedence for the poet as against the Hymns commonly termed Homeric and the works of Hesiod, inasmuch as these, like the "*Iliad*" and the "*Odyssey*," partake of the prehistoric character. To this reasonable question I reply as follows.

Among the so-termed Homeric Hymns, that which is addressed to Apollo is the one which may best claim the title of so high a parentage on account of the touching passage cited by Thucydides,* and of the claim to Homeric originality which that passage itself seems to contain. But, as I conceive, I have elsewhere proved, by an examination of the text and contents of that Hymn, that it cannot possibly be the work of Homer, but belongs to a later author.†

The case of Hesiod, who has sometimes even been deemed, however strangely, to be older than Homer, requires a separate consideration.

Among the instances which may be adduced of misleading method, one of the most conspicuous is the practice of dealing with Homer and Hesiod as twin authorities for the Achaian religion. Thus Rinck‡ speaks of "the ancient poets," and says that "in Hesiod and Homer"—there is not even the sorry preference of "Homer and Hesiod"—"we find the general structure of Hellenic religion completed." Now, it is true that a number of names and particulars found in Homer are also found in Hesiod; but this is a very small part of the truth.

It seems probable that there was a period, immediately following the Dorian conquest, in which the poems of Homer had been ejected from the country together with the more civilized Hellenic tribes; and the ancient tradition, which connects him with Lycurgus, may mean that he was reimported by that lawgiver, possibly from his being esteemed as a great war poet, which

* III., 104.

† See "*Homeric Synchronism*" (1876), Part I., Chap. IV.

‡ "*Religion der Hellenen*," VIII. (Zurich, 1855.)

was apparently his leading excellence in the eyes of Aristophanes.* Hesiod may have lived in Bœotia before Lycurgus, but probably during this period. In any case, we find confounded together by him all that in Homer was the subject of keen discrimination. The Olympian religion of Homer was national, political, theanthropic, and of highly scientific construction, all the parts of it standing in due and orderly relation to one another. But the "Theogony" of Hesiod is neither national, nor political, nor (in any distinctive manner) theanthropic; nor is it scientific in any sense higher than that of a series of catalogues. Foreign and domestic elements, archaic and nascent or embryonic cults, are all set down side by side without distinction. Above all, the Nature-powers at large, including a multitude of abstractions such as Chaos, Erebus, Night, and many more, whom Homer virtually deposes, are restored to their high places in the lineage from which the thearchy is derived.

The comparison between the two poets is, indeed, extremely curious. Besides considerable coincidence, and very great divergence, in direct statement, we may observe that Hesiod, manifestly the more modern of the two, imitates Homer in a multitude of particulars. He constantly uses "Olympian" as an epithet for his divinities, but he has also imitations which are much more specific. For instance, he introduces the name of Iris, of whom we fail to find any trace in the religion of historic Greece, and whom, accordingly, Hesiod could not well be led to commemorate except, as I am tempted to say, in a rather blind following of Homer. But his departures from Homer, in letter and in spirit, are not less remarkable. In the well-remembered meeting of Zeus and Herè on Mount Ida, Homer graces and also veils the occurrence by introducing the immediate and spontaneous growth beneath them of flowers and fresh herbage; the tribute of Earth to the head of Olympos. Now in Zeus there was, along with sensuality, a certain majesty, and even a certain refinement. But Hesiod borrows the same figure first for Aphrodite,† who in Homer has no command over any natural agency except that of impure passion, and secondly for Poseidon,‡ who, in the Poems, notwithstanding his extraction and prerogatives, is in character little better than an exhibition of sheer animal force without any moral or transcendental element. It is not too much

* Aristoph., *Batr.*, 1,034.† *Theog.*, 194.‡ *Ibid.*, 277-279.

to say that the work of Hesiod, most valuable without doubt in its own sphere, is not only different from, but even alien to, the works of Homer.

The Earth,* or Gaia, repressed in the Homeric scheme, and divested of all but physical attributes, is the progenitress of the Heaven of Hesiod. Okeanos is their joint offspring; whereas he is in Homer the first ancestor of gods and men.† Hesiod, again, makes Earth the parent of Kronos, and with him of the strangest miscellany of abstractions and realities.‡ But in truth, and speaking at large, nothing can in spirit be more alien to Homeric ideas than to derive the Olympian rulers from Gaia, the most material, the coarsest, if I may so speak, among all the objects of the Nature-worship that he deposed.

For another instance, Briareus, in Homer,§ is the son of the exotic Poseidon, who is himself the son of Kronos. In Hesiod the son becomes the uncle, for Briareus is a brother of Kronos, as are the Cyclop family.|| Again, the Erinues, in Homer a creation of singular nobleness, are in Hesiod sisters of the rebel Gigantes. It would be an endless task to note all the contradictions between the "Theogony," on one side, and both the letter and spirit of Homer, on the other. I will close with two instances which will stand *instar omnium*. The great Athenè is, in Homer, conspicuous for the universality of her gifts; and her being the war-goddess figures only as a kind of secondary attribute. But in the three lines of the "Theogony" which relate her birth and character, the whole description is one of war, tumult, and terror.

Again, when Hesiod introduces Iris,¶ the ethereal creation of Homer, the most remote of all his divine company from association with the nature-cult, he makes Thaumás, a son of Nereus, her father, and a daughter of Okeanos her mother; utterly confounding together the things which Homer labors hardest to keep apart.

Except that the rule of Zeus and his court is set forth as the actually prevailing system in both, the productions of the two poets confuse rather than illustrate one another; and the rural, local, industrial, pacific muse of Hesiod** stands in a contrast almost ludicrous with the great works which Homer addresses for man to man, and which have conveyed the whole world of his day to all the worlds of all the succeeding generations. The "The-

* Theog., 126. † Ibid., 133. II., XIV., 201, 302.

‡ Theog., 129-137. § II., I., 404.

|| Theog., 139, 149. ¶ Theog., 237, 265.

** "Works and Days," v. 19.

ogony" only touches Homer to darken him; nor does it throw upon the origins of Hellenic nationality or religion so much as a single ray of light. And these two, opposed at every point of deeper meaning, even when the statements of fact seem to coincide, are treated almost as if they had been twin artists, jointly employed in a common work. This is the method of proceeding which it seems to me necessary not only to renounce, but to reverse, if we are ever to find any true and profitable meaning in the old Olympian religion.

The work of Rinck, which I have quoted, is now of old date. And it is well known that the German experts have, during the present century, been so unequivocally the leaders of the world in classical research that our debt to them is one perhaps needless to acknowledge, and certainly impossible to overstate. But, so far as I know, they, as well as the scholars of other countries, have, with the one distinguished exception of Nägelsbach,* continued to treat the Homeric evidence as if it were simply part and parcel of a homogeneous common stock, which continued in a gradual course of accumulation down to and including the Roman period. I hope it is not inconsistent with gratitude, or with respect, to say that this continuance can hardly be due to a reasoned and deliberate conviction, but may have sprung from a usage which needs only to be questioned in order to be discarded.

The severance now proposed of the Homeric from the later Greek system of religion is, in truth, at once a necessity and an advantage. It is, in the first place, a necessity, for without this no clear and consistent picture of the religion can be presented either for the heroic or for the classical period. If we take the great human characters described by Homer, such as Achilles, Helen, Odysseus, Hector, we find that in the historic time their aspects were blurred and their outlines shifted, so that the general effect was seriously or entirely altered. And even so it is with the Homeric deities. In Homer we find portraits of them drawn and finished with consummate care; so drawn that a sculptor, if deeply imbued with Homeric study, would be able to preserve the individualities of the Olympian court as faithfully as those of Agamemnon's council. But with reference to the aggregate of

*Nägelsbach, "*Homerische Theologie*," Nürnberg, 1861. Preceded by the "*Nachhomerische Theologie bis auf Alexander*," Nürnberg, 1857. The "*Mythologie der Ilias*," by Dr. Von Sybel (Marburg, 1877), contributes little or nothing to elucidate the subject.

the deities of the historic period, such an attempt would clearly be desperate. The Apollo is lowered and fundamentally changed ; the Arès and the Aphroditè are promoted, nay, almost pitch-forked, into a new position ; the common properties of deity encroach on the distinctive ; all true personality is enfeebled. In the case of the Erinues, nothing less than a disastrous revolution is brought about. The ethical color is itself affected. So is the association, or polity. What is a true picture of the Olympian system of Homer, with its power and habit of collective action, would be an untrue picture for the classical period ; and *vice versâ*.

But there is also a great advantage in the separate treatment of the Homeric scheme of religion. In the examination of the prehistoric religions generally, it is felt that they extend over long periods of time in which great changes must have taken place. It follows that, in the mass of particulars presented to us, some are older, some newer ; but that we have no effective, or even possible, means of separating the old from the new. Now, let us suppose that in some one of these cases we should find that we were able to note a certain portion, or a certain form, of their particulars, as absolutely original, or, at any rate, as lying near the source ; again, as being thereby distinguished broadly from all the rest ; and as forming a point of departure from which the measurements of the rest could be taken. Is it not obvious that the gain would be immense ? and that new lights, decisive in their character, would or might be thrown upon the most important questions ? For example, we should obtain data of a positive character towards determining whether the history of ancient religion, as it grows older, exhibits at all, and, if so, in what particulars, the notes of an upward or of a downward movement. But this high vantage ground is exactly what is found ready to our hands, in the case of the Olympian religion, through the poems of Homer. He is the only primitive author who has treated the subject of religion systematically, and has presented it to us, first as an organic whole, and next as an organic whole that still carried upon it, in his day, the notes of its derivation from yet earlier sources. With this we should compare all the later forms, and it should supply a standard which forms an element of the case when we proceed to measure them.

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[TO BE CONTINUED.]